DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 217 153 CE 032 280

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TITLE Using LEA to Improve Adult Reading Skills.
PUB DATE [81]
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; Adult Literacy; Behavioral Objectives; Definitions; Educational Practices; *Individual Instruction; Individual Needs; Instructional Materials; *Language Experience Approach; Learning Activities; Material Development; Outcomes of Education; Pretests Posttests; *Program Effectiveness; *Reading Improvement; *Reading Skills; Role Playing; Student Developed Materials; Student Motivation; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS Oakland Unified School District CA

ABSTRACT

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is a particularly effective means of increasing the motivation and reading skills of students enrolled in adult basic education classes. A form of personalized rather than individualized instruction, the LEA is designed with the personal needs of a specific student or group of students in mind. The LEA is a student-centered approach to teaching and improving reading that uses the student's own experiences and interests as the subject of the reading material. Key to the LEA are student-developed materials and role-playing activities. During the course of these role playing activities, the following areas are addressed: word attack skills, basic vocabulary, comprehension skills, and thinking/problem-solving strategies. Increases in student reading scores as a result of the LEA have been impressive, with comparison of pre- and posttest reading comprehension test scores indicating an average increase of 1.7 grade levels per 100 hours of instruction. Even more dramatic changes in classroom attendance and dropout reduction have occurred after adoption of the LEA. (MN)

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ED217153

Using LEA to Improve Adult Reading Skills

By
Juliet E. Crutchfield

The typical Adult Basic Education student who attends my class in the Oakland Public Schools Neighborhood Centers' Program is either unemployed or underemployed. S/he may have family, health, emotional, legal, and financial problems that lessen his/her attention in class. S/he may or may not have completed high school. S/he may be indifferent about citizenship responsibilities as indicated by the comments: "Why should I vote? It won't make any difference." S/he may have had an unsuccessful experience with formal, large group instruction. S/he is much more likely to be motivated to improve his/her reading skills and remain in school if the instruction is personalized.*

A variety of activities take place in my classroom, but I have found that the Language Experience Approach is particularly effective in increasing student motivation and reading skills. Two students, or as many as three, are asked to resolve a problem through role playing. The activity is taped and later transcribed to print. Each student is encouraged to express his/her opinions, feelings, and ideas freely. The problem may be satisfactorily resolved, but

*Reading instruction that is designed with the personal needs of a specific student or group of students in mind. Personalized instruction should not be confused with individualized instruction, which deals with student academic needs.

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this is not necessary, since the main purpose of the activity is to have the students create personalized reading material.

In transcribing the tapes obvious grammatical, word choice, sentence structure, and syntactical errors are corrected. An attempt is made to avoid the reinforcement of non-standard English, but the original flavor, rhythm, and style of the students' language is left. Original personalized material is created in this manner at the independent reading level.

The following is a role playing activity created by my Adult Basic Education students.

Statement of the Problem by the Teacher

Mr. Payne brings home $158 a week, gives his wife $108, and keeps $50 for himself. At the end of each week most of the bills are left unpaid. The couple has sought the help of a marriage counselor.

Marriage Counselor: Mr. and Mrs. Payne you have filled out an application for counseling. You seem to have a problem.

Mr. Payne: Yeah. We have a big problem, a financial problem. I only make $158 per week. I keep $50 for myself. I give her $108. She complains that I'm not bringing home enough money and that I'm not giving her enough to pay the

bills.

Marriage Counselor: What about you Mrs. Payne? Do you think he is giving you enough money for living expenses?

Mrs. Payne: Yes. I think so.

Marriage Counselor: Then what is the problem?

Mrs. Payne: I don't like to complain.

Mr. Payne: You have been complaining about not having enough money. Now you get us here and waste our time with a counselor. You bug me! Always nagging about money!

Mrs. Payne: Why did you come then?

Mr. Payne: You got your nerve! I came because of you. You claim that I'm not giving you enough money. As soon as we get home you'll change into a different person and start nagging. But while we are here in front of this marriage counselor you act like an angel.

Marriage Counselor: He says that you constantly nag.

Mrs. Payne: That's not true. It's a lie.

Marriage Counselor: Think about this. Some people can hold things inside. They can hold things in and deal with them. To others it's like a lead pipe. Pressure can break a lead pipe. If such a person is to solve his problems, he must have help. That's why I'm in this business. I help people solve problems. Now if there was no problem, you wouldn't be here. (Pause) Do you agree in public and

disagree at home? Are you that kind of wife?

Mrs. Payne: Disagree?

Marriage Counselor: Do you disagree at home and while you are in public do you agree? He says that you nag at home about not receiving enough money. (Pause) I see that you brought some of your bills with you, but you tell me that there is no problem.

Mr. Payne: What do you do with the money I give you?

Marriage Counselor: First of all let me find out her problem.

Mr. Payne: She knows her problem.

Marriage Counselor: (To Mr. Payne) Now let's remain relaxed. (To Mrs. Payne) What is said here is confidential. Don't be afraid to speak.

Mrs. Payne: (To the counselor) Well, do you think there is a problem?

Marriage Counselor: He just said that you nag at home all the time.

Mrs. Payne: I didn't say that I nagged. He doesn't know what nagging is.

Marriage Counselor: He doesn't know! How long have you been married?

Mrs. Payne: Three years.

Marriage Counselor: You mean to tell me that he doesn't

understand you and he's been married to you for three years?

Mrs. Payne: Yes.

Mr. Payne: All of these bills sitting here! What are you going to do about these bills? What do you do with my money, the money I bring home? I came home one day and saw a stack of bills on the kitchen table. I was shocked. What do you do with the money?

Mrs. Payne: Me?

Mr. Payne: You. Yeah you.

Mrs. Payne: I only spend the money on things that we need.

Mr. Payne: Why aren't the bills paid? They need to be paid.

Mrs. Payne: What do you do with the $50?

Mr. Payne: That's my business. I'm asking you, what do you do with the $108?

Mrs. Payne: I use it for essentials.

Mr. Payne: What about the telephone bill, the gas and electricity bill, the water bill, and the furniture bill?

Mrs. Payne: Right. That is what the money goes for.

Mr. Payne: Then why are these bills sitting here unpaid?

Mrs. Payne: I don't know. Why are they?

Mr. Payne: Because you haven't paid them! That's why we are here in the first place. I give you money. What do

you do with it?

Mrs. Payne: I use it for things we need.

Marriage Counselor: (To Mrs. Payne) Do you feel you are getting enough money?

Mrs. Payne: Yes, I'm getting enough.

Mr. Payne: (To Mrs. Payne) Well then, what the hell are we doing here?

Students enjoy role playing and through it they express their important observations, thoughts, and experiences which are worthy of remembering and can be shared with others. The teacher should pay particular attention to what students reveal about themselves. An alert teacher will then be able to respond to student concerns with sensitivity.

In the Adult Basic Education classroom learning is not one directional. It probably should not be in other school situations. When ideas are transmitted from teacher to student; from student to student; and from student to teacher learning occurs for all involved. The skillful teacher taps the strengths of everyone to provide a maximum learning experience.

All students are presented with a typed copy of the role playing activity. Word attack skills and basic vocabulary are taught using the material created by the students. Comprehension skills are practiced when the teacher leads the students through Herber/Taba

questioning strategies.* (Treize, 1972) At the literal level information is collected from classroom members who have read the LEA materials, with the question, "What happened in the story?" This involves understanding the exact meaning of the words and the simple recall of facts. At the next highest level, the inferential level, the students are lead with questions intended to draw from them inferences about relationships: "Why do you think . . . happened?" "Why does Mrs. Payne seem reluctant to state the problem?" "Do you feel that this is a happy marriage?" "Will it last?" "What kind of attitude does the marriage counselor exhibit toward the husband?" "toward the wife?" Affective identification occurs when students are asked "Has any thing similar to this ever happened to you?" "How did the story make you feel?" "Why do you think you felt that way?" The last level is the Generalization or Conceptualization Level. The students are asked to make generalizations based on the reading and discussion. Such questions as "What can be said about people who disagree about money?"; "What conclusions can you draw about the people in the story?"; and "How could the couple solve their problem?" are asked. This last level represents the

*These are thinking/problem solving strategies in which an attempt is made to increase the student's level of comprehension by asking selected questions at increasingly more difficult levels of cognition.

highest level of cognition.

The LEA is a student centered approach to teaching and improving reading that uses the students' own experiences and interests as the subject of the reading material. The approach allows the teacher to adapt classroom teaching to student needs and interests. The adult creates material s/he is interested in and wants to read. The material created by this approach is motivating. It takes into consideration adult vocabulary and patterns of thinking. It allows for personalization, individualization, and small group work. The method provides the teacher with a good way of reaching the educationally disadvantaged adult student.

Results:

Increases in student reading scores have been impressive. Enrollment is continuous and students are pre-tested after two weeks of instruction on the Reading section of the Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE) Form A Level II. (Karlsen, 1967) They are later post-tested after 100 hours of instruction on Form B. Students average an increase of 1.7 grade levels per 100 hours of instruction. It is true that many reading activities take place in my classroom and that the increase in reading scores can not be attributed solely to the LEA. The more dramatic result is the increase in student motivation. Students have begun to attend class regularly and with greater attention to classroom instruction. The drop out rate has

been greatly lowered. Students often sneak copies of the written material from my desk before it is assigned. This action indicates the high interest appeal of the material. The LEA and the adaptations I have made in using it seem to help the students acquire positive self-concepts. I can not help but believe that students leave my class with a positive attitude toward learning that will follow them in future educational pursuits.

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